Me Read? No Way!

A practical guide to improving boys' literacy skills

Ontario Education **excellence for all**

Ontario

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This publication is available on the Ministry of Education's website, at http://www.edu.gov.on.ca

About This Guide

This guide was prepared by the Ontario Ministry of Education as part of an initiative to support student success in literacy. In particular, it focuses on boys' literacy.

Based on an international review of effective practices, the guide is intended to stimulate discussion of this important issue among educators in Ontario and to provide practical and effective strategies that teachers across the province can put to use in the classroom, both immediately and over the longer term.

Who the guide is for

This guide is intended for teachers, principals, and other professionals in the field of education at the elementary or secondary level. It will be of particular interest to those who are developing and delivering literacy programs.

What the guide contains

This guide offers a rich source of practices and strategies that are being used in successful literacy programs for boys around the world and that educators in Ontario can draw on to create a stimulating and engaging learning environment for both boys and girls. In this guide, you will find:

- supports, information, tips, and ideas conveniently organized into distinct categories;
- a wide variety of sources that you can refer to for more in-depth exploration of particular concepts or topics.

How to use this guide

This guide is structured around thirteen "Strategies for Success", which are listed in the table of contents. These strategy sections attempt to distil for educators the most important research on how boys learn to read and write and the most effective instructional approaches and strategies for helping boys enjoy learning to read and write well. We suggest that you review the list of "Strategies for Success" in the table of contents to pinpoint those areas most relevant to your immediate needs, and read the rest as time permits and need dictates. The guide is designed for browsing!

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To make the guide as useful and accessible as possible, the following four categories of information have been singled out for special treatment. Each section is signalled in the guide by means of the icon shown alongside each heading below.

Quick facts

Background information and research findings

Try it now!

Practical suggestions that you can implement quickly and easily

Best practices

Effective instructional strategies and approaches that you may wish to explore

Insight

Insights from the literature about boys' literacy development and literacy instruction for boys

A list of references and resources for further reading is provided at the end of the guide.

Why Boys?

All educators share the common goal of providing equitable learning opportunities for every student in the classroom. Providing equitable opportunities for girls is a familiar topic; providing them for boys is a relatively recent issue, but one that is appearing with increasing urgency on education agendas around the world.

Quick Facts

- An increasing volume of evidence indicates that gender is a significant factor in both choice of reading materials and reading achievement for boys and girls.
- Boys typically score lower than girls on standardized tests in the language arts.
- Boys are more likely than girls to be placed in special education programs.
- Boys are less likely than girls to go to university.
- Dropout rates are higher for boys than for girls.

What test scores tell us

The following provincial, national, and international assessments have produced results that echo the findings listed above.

Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO): The results of assessments administered to students in Grades 3 and 6 show that boys do not perform as well as girls in reading and writing. (The results for mathematics do not show similar gaps.) The results of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) also show that boys do not perform as well as girls in reading and writing.

Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): The PIRLS assessment conducted in 2001 revealed that Grade 4 girls performed better than boys in all thirty-four countries where the assessment was administered, including Canada, where two Canadian provinces, Ontario and Quebec, participated in the study.

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): The results of the PISA assessment conducted in 2000 show that girls performed better than boys on the reading test in all countries and in all Canadian provinces.

School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP): In the 2002 SAIP writing assessment, 13- and 16-year-old girls across Canada scored higher than boys in the same age groups.

The evidence of weaker reading and writing skills among boys provided by these and other assessments has become an issue of major concern, since poor literacy skills can have a profound effect on performance in other subjects, as well as on students' success throughout their lives.

Towards a solution

Addressing the needs of boys effectively will require dialogue and the collective expertise and talents of all partners in the education process, including government, educators, parents, and community members.

Among these partners, however, educators play a particularly important role in determining how individual students develop as readers and writers. It is critical that we provide classroom experiences that respond to the interests, needs, and learning styles of all students, and that we explore ways to engage boys and girls equally as readers and writers.

Can't read or don't read?

G. Kylene Beers identifies three distinct categories of students who *can* read but don't:

- *the dormant reader*: "I'm too busy right now!"
- *the uncommitted reader*: "I might be a reader, someday."
- *the unmotivated reader*: "I'm never gonna like it!"

Beers concludes that there is no single "template" for the aliterate student; rather, there are individuals who have differing views about themselves and about reading. By understanding these views, we can gain greater insight into why some students choose not to read.

(Beers, 1996, pp. 31–33)

As they get older, boys increasingly describe themselves as non-readers. Few have this attitude early in their schooling, but, according to some experts, nearly 50 per cent describe themselves as non-readers by the time they enter secondary school.

What about girls?

Although gender is a significant factor, it is not the only factor at play in determining performance in reading and writing. In fact, the differences *among* boys and *among* girls are greater than the differences *between* boys and girls. Consequently, educators must be careful not to focus on the gender differences between students, but rather to recognize that the effectiveness of certain approaches in literacy instruction may be tied to gender. With that understanding, teachers will be better able to provide appropriate and equitable opportunities for both boys and girls.

Although the strategies contained in this guide focus on engaging boys in reading and writing, they also represent practices that will enhance the learning environment for both boys and girls.

Taking gender differences into account in the classroom

Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm identify the following gender differences related to literacy that teachers may encounter in their work with individual learners:

With respect to achievement:

- Boys take longer to learn to read than girls do.
- Boys read less than girls.
- Girls tend to comprehend narrative texts and most expository texts significantly better than boys do.
- Boys tend to be better at information retrieval and work-related literacy tasks than girls are.

With respect to attitude:

- Boys generally provide lower estimations of their reading abilities than girls do.
- Boys value reading as an activity less than girls do.
- Boys have much less interest in leisure reading than girls do, and are far more likely to read for utilitarian purposes than girls are.
- Significantly more boys than girls declare themselves to be non-readers.
- Boys . . . express less enthusiasm for reading than girls do.

(Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, p. 10)

"Boys' underachievement is a major concern. Nationally, boys fall behind girls in early literacy skills and this gap in attainment widens with age. The challenge of raising achievement directly addresses the learning needs of our students and the professional growth of our teachers, and enhances the role of the school as an agent of social change. We want to give boys and girls the best opportunity to become powerful learners."

(UK Department for Education and Skills, n.d.)

In a study of 10- to 12-year-olds, Elaine Millard found that the following characteristics of reading programs in schools contributed to a reading environment that was more relevant to the interests of girls than of boys:

- discouragement of certain kinds of literature as unsuitable for classroom reading
- insufficient guidance from the teacher in choosing what to read and in helping students develop a range of reading strategies
- use of reading activities as a time-filler
- a limited selection of genres
- the disparity between students' sense of why reading is important (e.g., to give them a good start in life) and their perception of its purposes in school (e.g., primarily as reading stories for pleasure).

(Millard, 1997, p. 1)

Educators in Ontario schools may wish to review their own reading environments and practices, particularly in light of the results of a survey on students' reading and writing activities outside school that accompanied the 2003 OSSLT. In responding to the survey, boys reported that they read a wide variety of materials outside of school, including newspapers (50%), comics (35%), manuals or instructions (25%), and magazines (64%). In addition, 82% of boys reported that they write e-mail messages and participate in chat-room conversations.

"[Wilhelm and Smith found that] boys who were considered to be problem or highly reluctant readers in the classroom had very rich literate lives outside of school, and used various forms of literacy to pursue their interests and goals. . . . In essence, none of the boys in [Wilhelm and Smith's] study rejected literacy. What they did almost universally reject was 'school literacy.'"

(Hyatt, 2002, p. 12)

Strategies for Success

Have the right stuff

Choosing appropriate classroom resources for boys

When observing boys in the classroom, it may be tempting to conclude that they do not like to read. It may be more accurate, however, to conclude that, in many cases, it is not that boys do not like to read, but that they do not like to read what they are presented with in the classroom. Offering a rich and varied mix of materials and being mindful of boys' reading preferences can go a long way towards building an engaging and inviting reading environment for boys.

Quick Facts

Boys like to read:

- books that reflect their image of themselves – what they aspire to be and to do;
- books that make them laugh and that appeal to their sense of mischief;
- fiction, but preferably fiction that focuses on action more than on emotions;
- books in series, such as the Harry Potter series, which seem to provide boys with a sense of comfort and familiarity;
- science fiction or fantasy (many boys are passionate about these genres);
- newspapers, magazines, comic books, baseball cards, and instruction manuals – materials that are often not available in the classroom. Interestingly, when they read these materials, many boys do not consider themselves to be reading at all, precisely because these materials are not valued at school.

(Moloney, 2002)

"A good book for a boy is one he wants to read."
(Moloney, 2002)

A well-stocked classroom includes the following kinds of texts:

- both fiction and non-fiction
- non-print resources, such as CD-ROMs
- texts representing a wide range of formats and genres
- popular as well as "traditional" materials
- lots of easy-to-read books, to build fluency and to provide enjoyment

Try It Now!

Engage students in selecting materials for the classroom or library to enhance their sense of ownership of, and interest in, the new resources.

Insight

Myra Barrs has written that:

"reading is something you do with your whole self. . . . We have come to understand much more about the role of the reader in reading, the way in which different readers bring different things to texts and all readers bring themselves (in fact, in James Britton's words, 'We read ourselves.'). The most basic and obvious aspect of themselves that they bring is their identity as a man or woman, a black or white person, a person from a particular social background or class – their social identity. They read books seeking themselves in books – and if they can find no reflection at all of themselves or the world they know in the book, they may not continue with the book."

(Barrs, 1999, p. 3)

Best Practices

Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm suggest providing boys with texts that:

- **are "storied",** using a narrative approach that focuses more on plot and action than on description;
- **are visual,** such as movies and cartoons, providing a multimedia experience;
- **are musical,** providing the opportunity to develop literacy skills through an exploration of lyrics and discussions about musical tastes, the role of music in students' lives, and so on;
- **provide "exportable knowledge"** – that is, information boys can use in conversation, such as headlines, box scores, jokes, "cool parts" of books or movies;
- **sustain engagement,** such as series books or collections that allow readers to "see what's up" with characters they have come to care about;
- **show multiple perspectives,** exploring topics from a variety of points of view;
- **are novel** or unexpected in a school setting, such as satire;
- **are edgy** or controversial – worth arguing and caring about;
- **contain powerful or positive ideas** that have political, moral, or "life-expanding" appeal;
- **are funny,** appealing to boys' taste for humour.

(Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, pp. 150–157)

In *Misreading Masculinity*, Newkirk (2002, p.170) suggests that a culture produces a broad range of narrative forms. These forms may be written, oral, visual, musical, or some combination of the four, and can include web pages, rock videos, television shows, cartoons, jokebooks, and many other materials that tend not to be "school-sanctioned". Newkirk argues that an openness to popular culture in the classroom may be beneficial for boys, and that it does not mean that established literature, the kind that has traditionally been valued in schools, should be abandoned. Teachers should keep in mind, however, that the tighter the circle is drawn around "appropriate" materials, the greater the risk that some students will be left out.

Choosing texts with positive male role models

When selecting texts and other materials for study, are we ensuring that boys are exposed to models of men who are courageous, sensitive, moral, socially adept, honest, nurturing, successful in relationships, responsible, and reliable? (Cullen, n.d.). Teachers can look to current and classic literature to provide boys with positive male role models. William Brozo and Ronald Schmelzer (1997, pp. 4–11) define ten male archetypes – such as pilgrim, patriarch, and healer – and provide examples of literature illustrating each type. This kind of literature often engages boys' creative imagination, and can help to offset the influence of the dominant male images they encounter in some forms of popular culture – images that may be less than ideal.

Strategies for Success

Help make it a habit

Providing frequent opportunities to read and write

To close the literacy gender gap, teachers must make reading and writing an intentional, persistent, and emphatic focus in the classroom – in all subjects. Cultivating the reading and writing habit – by providing enjoyable reading and writing opportunities across the curriculum, ensuring that reading and writing assignments engage boys as well as girls, and offering boys consistent opportunities to achieve success – can pay substantial dividends.

> **"If you don't have the time to read, you don't have the time or the tools to write."**
>
> *(King, 2000, p. 117)*

Eileen Armstrong suggests developing a year-round program of fun reading activities to keep students in secondary schools "fully booked up". Here are just a few of her suggestions:

- **Fantasy sports league:** Have boys nominate players for a fictional "dream team" by having them read about their favourite sports figures and make a case for why those athletes should be on the team.
- **Book banquet:** Have students create a "menu" of books for their peers.
- **Cool at school:** Link reading to current trends or personalities of interest to students.
- **Dare to read:** Have students read horror or mystery books packaged in black bags, and write reviews of the scariest reads.
- **Book party:** Give students a voice in choosing the books you acquire, and hold a box-opening party when the new books arrive.

(Armstrong, 2002, p. 17)

Try It Now!

Make reading fun, make it engaging!

- **Read aloud** with expression, so students can hear how a capable and fluent reader sounds.
- **Have fun,** by using your voice and body to bring the story alive.
- **Use visuals,** such as illustrated texts, where appropriate, to help students construct meaning.
- **Provide props** and link the texts you're reading to real-world objects.
- **Remember the Web,** using it to find texts that require students to think, analyse, and discuss.
- **Involve boys** by creating a "boys only" zone in the library and by encouraging boys to recommend their favourite texts to others.
- **Plan personal reading time** for students, in regularly scheduled blocks of time every day.

(Braxton, 2003, p. 43)

Create a link between reading and writing

There is often a correlation between the range and quality of a student's reading and the student's development as a writer. Reading broadly gives students rich models to draw on when crafting their own writing. Here are some ways to help all students, but especially boys, make connections between reading and writing that will enhance the development of the full range of their literacy skills.

- Explicitly discuss models of good writing in detail, pointing out elements such as sentence structure, paragraphing, and vocabulary, so that students become aware of the choices that the writer has made.
- Emphasize how the writer's choices reflect the intended purpose of the text, and how the text affects the reader.
- Maintain a balance between the development of skills such as spelling and grammar and the exploration of content, meaning, and effect.
- Identify different genres and text types that students will encounter in particular subject areas and provide reading and writing opportunities in those subjects, using the appropriate genres and types.

(OFSTED, 2003, pp. 9–19)

"In one sense, reading and writing represent the choice of language over physical action, the vicarious over the actual. But writing time often provides the most open space (outside of recess) in the curriculum – a space to enact fantasies of power, adventure and friendship. And as many boys claim, when they are writing these adventures, they feel themselves physically inside the stories. Rather than denying the physical needs of boys, writing can employ that energy – if we keep the space open for their play."

(Newkirk, 2002, p. 178)

Best Practices

According to Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, a balanced reading and writing program in the *primary and junior grades* should allow for the following activities:

- Read-alouds
- Shared reading
- Guided reading
- Independent reading
- Modelled writing
- Interactive/shared writing (teacher and students)
- Guided writing/writing workshops
- Independent writing

(Fountas and Pinnell, 2001)

Rick Allen points out that **silent sustained reading (SSR)** is an important part of successful literacy programs at the *secondary level*. In one San Francisco high school, reluctant readers in Grade 9 made great strides in both reading and writing by:

- reading 200 pages a month in twice-weekly SSR sessions;
- writing about their SSR sessions in reading logs;
- completing a monthly culminating project in which they reflected on themselves as readers.

(Allen, 2000)

Teach with purpose

Understanding boys' learning styles

Research indicates that boys in particular benefit from tightly structured, well-focused lessons that have an obvious purpose and that are tied to the achievement of clear goals.

In the teaching of reading and writing, highly structured, scaffolded, and explicit instructional strategies are powerful tools for motivating boys and encouraging them to respond.

Quick Facts

Boys respond best when:

- work is assigned in bite-sized, digestible pieces and is time-limited;
- lessons are broken down into a variety of activities that include more "active" learning opportunities, such as drama, investigation, research, or the use of information technology;
- the work seems relevant to them – that is, when it has a purpose they can understand;
- lessons are delivered in a brisk, well-paced format, with an obvious direction, so that they can tell that progress is occurring;
- the work includes an element of competition and/or involves short-term goals;
- time is allowed for review and reflection following the lesson or assignment;
- an analysis of the "concrete" aspects of a text precedes an analysis of one's emotional response to it;
- they receive regular, positive feedback.

(Wilson, 2003, p. 12)

Structure is everything

Most boys do not cope well with vague instructions and long explanations; they require a much more structured approach to learning. Here are a few keys to success:

- Deliver highly structured lessons. For example, allow three minutes to complete an introductory activity, then five minutes for instruction or discussion in pairs, and so on.
- Use daily guided-reading experiences as the foundation of the reading program. Repeat the instructions, demonstrate the response activity, and provide direction as students read, to help them develop comprehension strategies and deal with unfamiliar words, structures, and ideas.
- Clearly define assessment tasks so that students, particularly those who are underachieving, understand the steps they must take to complete the work.

(West, 2000, p. 4; Booth, 2002, p. 61)

Try It Now!

Use this checklist to ensure that your reading and writing assignments enable boys to do their best.

- Have I provided clear instructions outlining exactly what is required?
- Have I mentioned the amount of time that students should spend on the activity?
- Have I explicitly stated when the assignment is due?
- Have I shown examples of what is expected?
- Is there a balance of individual and group work?
- Are there opportunities within the assignment for boys to show leadership skills?

(Pickup, 2001)

Letting boys in on the "secret"

Boys need to be let in on the "secret" of what happens when we read and write. We need to examine processes that are often hidden or left unspoken and make them clear and explicit.

For many boys, literature appears to involve a secret code, one that is understood by authors, teachers, and some students, especially girls. Not surprisingly, the fact that these "insiders" all understand the code and are able to interpret "deep" or "hidden" meanings makes the boys feel left out – and stupid.

Bruce Pirie (2002, p. 53) points out that "boys don't like to feel stupid . . . but they sometimes do, especially around girls, women, and English teachers. Women, it seems to them, often leave things unspoken, expecting men to read between the lines and make intuitive leaps. This makes boys nervous."

By "uncovering" the processes that good readers often use unconsciously – that is, by teaching those processes explicitly – teachers can finally let boys in on the secret.

> **"If we leave [the] processes of reading and writing cloaked in mystery, telling ourselves that it all either comes naturally or else it doesn't, we surrender to voodoo pedagogy. In voodoo, privileged people, objects and rituals are invested with secret magical power, and to some of our students it certainly seems that there must be mysterious, unnamed powers needed to do well in English."**
>
> *(Pirie, 2002, p. 52)*

Explicit teaching fosters good comprehension skills

Research indicates that good readers are strategic in their reading, and that the explicit teaching of comprehension strategies such as the following can foster the development of comprehension skills:

- monitoring one's understanding of a text and making adjustments (e.g., rereading a passage) as needed
- using relevant prior knowledge (e.g., to make predictions)
- generating questions about the text
- thinking aloud
- paying attention to and determining or "uncovering" a text's structure
- drawing inferences from a text
- constructing visual representations of plot lines, main and supporting ideas in a text, or relationships between characters and events (see *p. 19*)
- summarizing a text

"When talking with young students," says Nell K. Duke, "I often discuss the strategies in terms of good readers, as in 'Good readers think about what might be coming next.' I also model the uses of comprehension strategies by thinking aloud as I read. For example, to model the importance of monitoring understanding, I make comments such as, 'That doesn't make sense to me because . . . ' or 'I didn't understand that last part – I'd better go back.'"

(2004, p. 42).

Best Practices

Reciprocal teaching

Duke recommends "reciprocal teaching" as one approach to teaching multiple strategies simultaneously. In this approach, the teacher explicitly teaches and models the use of four comprehension strategies: asking questions, summarizing, clarifying, and making predictions. Students then take turns using these strategies, with help from the teacher and peers. Eventually, students acquire the ability to use the strategies on their own.

(Duke, 2004, p. 42)

Re-teaching

In model schools, individual teachers automatically "re-teach" information by:

- checking for understanding immediately after providing instruction;
- conducting a daily review for about five minutes;
- after major tests, having students correctly answer all the items that they missed on the test.

(Bell, 2002/2003, p. 33)

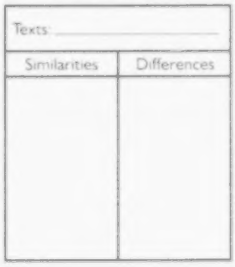
Try It Now!

Graphic organizers and other visual tools can be a useful means of demonstrating the relationships between things, both spatially and conceptually. They can be used in literacy activities in ways that may help "let boys in on the secret".

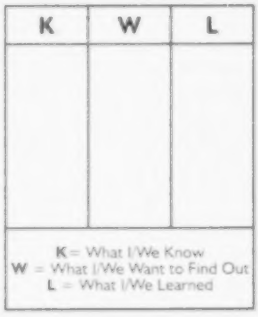
- Use graphic organizers to examine similarities and differences between characters or between various literary forms, such as poems, stories, and novels, or to contrast two different texts on the same topic.
- Use graphic organizers and other visual tools (e.g., concept wheels, sequence-of-events chains, sound wheels, story boards, word webs) to help students organize their thoughts before starting a writing activity.

(Teele, 2004, p. 110)

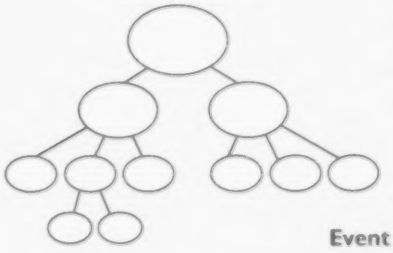
The T-Chart



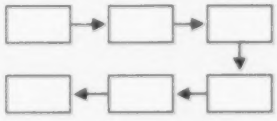
The KWL Chart



Network Tree



Sequence-of-Events Chain



Event Map or Web

Using writing frames to improve boys' writing

Writing frames are outlines or templates that give students a structure for communicating what they want to say. They provide a skeletal outline, with suggested sentence starters, connective words, and sentence modifiers, around which students structure their ideas.

Writing frames help students become familiar with a range of generic structures and ensure some success in writing, which helps to improve students' self-esteem and motivation.

An Explanation Frame

I want to explain why . . .

There are several reasons for this. The chief reason is . . .

Another reason is . . .

A further reason is . . .

So now you can see why . . .

(Wray and Lewis, n.d., p. 11)

Robin Marlin summarizes the findings of a case study on the use of writing frames to improve boys' writing as follows:

- Seeing a teacher model the use of writing frames or templates and using writing frames themselves helped students understand narrative structure.
- Breaking text down to its skeletal outline helped students understand how writers develop a story.
- Writing frames were most useful to students of average ability, but they also helped lower-achieving students, especially when those students used the frames in groups, with a teacher's guidance.
- Writing frames built structure into the narrative writing task, improving boys' writing performance.

(Marlin, n.d.)

Try It Now!

When working with reluctant writers, have them make a list to serve as a structure for a piece of writing. For example, have them list 10 things . . .

- to do last
- to do first
- never to do
- to change
- to keep secret
- to do before breakfast
- to do before leaving school
- to do slowly
- to do quickly
- I don't understand
- I'll never regret
- I'll never forget
- I'd like to forget
- about teeth
- you should try

(Frank, 1995, p. 226)

Using lists to structure writing can serve as a springboard for developing outlines for writing in various, more complex forms.

Strategies for Success

Embrace the arts

Using the arts to bring literacy to life

The connection between language and the arts is a rich one, yet this connection has traditionally been underutilized in the classroom. As vehicles for exploration, creation, and self-expression, the two disciplines have a great deal in common. The arts – drama, dance, music, and the visual arts – can contribute to the development of literacy skills while exposing students to a wide range of experiences. The arts can be used to explore ideas, to convey meaning, and to enhance understanding. Students are often powerfully affected by storytelling, dance, music, painting, photography, and sculpture. In fact, they often construct their own games using music, drawing, and drama. The arts give teachers a dynamic set of tools to use in the literacy classroom.

For boys, the arts provide a vehicle for making meaning visible, allowing them to "see" the story as it unfolds. Through the arts, boys can also express and explore emotion in a safe context. Both of these factors have been found to increase boys' understanding and enjoyment of the texts they read.

Insight

Studies have demonstrated many benefits of integrating the arts into language instruction, including improvements in the following areas, through the approaches or programs indicated:

- **writing** – for example, through the use of drama and drawing as strategies for rehearsing, evaluating, and revising ideas before writing begins
- **language mechanics, total language, and writing** – as a result of students' participation in music and poetry programs
- **total reading, reading vocabulary, and reading comprehension** – for example, through role-playing, improvisation, and story writing
- **higher-order thinking skills and the ability to articulate ideas** – through a comprehensive arts and language program

Studies have also shown that integrating the arts into language instruction helps to improve students' *self-concept, cognitive development, critical-thinking abilities,* and *social skills.*

(White, 2001, p. 3)

Visualization strategies motivate boys

"Elliot Eisner posits that 'those who cannot imagine, cannot read.' Although reading can lead to abstract thought, that thought depends at its base on concrete, highly visualized experiences of the individual reader. All thinking proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, from the visible to the invisible."

(Wilhelm, 2004, p. 14)

Visualization strategies can enhance boys' motivation to read and write, as well as their engagement in and enjoyment of reading and writing. For example:

- **Writing:** Boys often enjoy creating art in conjunction with writing activities. Painting or drawing can give boys a greater sense of creative freedom and result in more detailed descriptions and stories.
- **Reading:** Boys often enjoy working with "readers' theatre" scripts, which allow them to feel like active participants in a story. Readers' theatre gives them an opportunity to explore characters and their relationships and to formulate resolutions to dramatic situations that may emphasize creativity, good humour, or cleverness.

"Well-designed drama is more than an opportunity for boys to stretch their limbs. Good drama activities invite students to step into the role and combine what they know (from their own lives in the 'real' world) with the new or fictional framework offered by the drama. For students who are uncomfortable talking about their own feelings, drama offers rich opportunities to be someone else or somewhere else, and to deflect the expression of feelings into a fictitious form. . . . If feelings can be deflected through role-playing, unexpected fluency may result."

(Pirie, 2002, p. 47)

Drama is *doing*

In literacy instruction, drama can be used for the following purposes:

- **in reading** – to display and reinforce understanding of the text; to build empathy with characters in a story
- **in writing** – as an alternative method of planning for writing; to facilitate collaborative work on written tasks; to stimulate imagination; to link writing activities to relevant real-life scenarios
- **in speaking and listening** – to facilitate the discussion of texts with peers; to enable students to talk about what they intend to write; to help students formulate or plan a written text

(Younger and Warrington, 2002, p. 3)

Learning with professional artists

Rick Allen (2004) has written about schools in the United States that work with local artists or professional groups to "bring the arts to students". For example, the Woodrow Wilson Arts Integrated School, through a partnership with the New York City Opera, had opera performers conduct workshops and performances of *Don Pasquale* for students in Grades 3 and 5. The students studied the opera, then worked with the performers in various scenes. Afterwards, they saw the opera performed at the Lincoln Center. The students then prepared a musical puppet show based on the opera and performed it for a guest class from another school.

Try It Now!

Music to their ears

Use students' interest in music as a springboard for writing.

- Use **music without lyrics** to inspire students to create word lists, phrases, lyrics, descriptions of feelings, word-images, letters, dramas or dialogues, slogans or protests, poems or chants, or an imagined description of the composer.
- Use **music with lyrics** to inspire students to change words in a text, add a verse to a poem, invent a new song title, design a record cover, or write different lyrics on the same theme.

(Frank, 1995, p. 82)

Games and role playing support reading

Jeffrey Wilhelm provides the following examples of the way games and role playing can enhance students' understanding of stories, novels, and other texts.

- **Role playing:** Students take on the roles of characters in a text.
- **Dramatic play:** Students use a situation from a text as a springboard for creating their own story or drama.
- **Guided imagery:** Students are asked to imagine scenes, and subsequently write about or visually depict them.
- **Snapshot drama:** Students are asked to depict a moment from the text as a "freeze frame", particularly as a way of describing characters' expressions and gestures at that moment.
- **Analogy drama:** Students enact a story from their own lives that parallels a situation in a text.
- **"To tell the truth" game:** As in the television show of the same name, a few students, each of whom is depicting the same character from a text, are grilled by a panel that ultimately determines which student has most convincingly "become" the character.
- **Correspondence:** Students write letters, diary entries, and advertisements in the roles of various story characters.
- **Missing-scene scripts:** Students write scripts for scenes that, while suggested in a text, were not explicitly described.
- **Newscast:** Students produce a news broadcast based on characters and events in a text.

(Wilhelm, 1997, pp. 100–101)

"Reading after drama is different. . . . I can see things better and I feel like I have more choices."

A male student (Quoted in Wilhelm, 1997, p. 110)

Let them talk

Appealing to boys' need for social interaction

Some boys need to talk through their ideas before they are sure they understand what they have read and before they can commit their ideas to paper effectively. Failing to provide for this social component, for the opportunity to verbalize ideas before reading or writing about them, can create a problem for some boys. This problem may be invisible to both the student and the teacher, but it can significantly hamper a boy's ability to become a successful, fully engaged reader and writer.

Myra Barrs suggests the following classroom situations and instructional approaches as ideal for encouraging talk as part of reading and writing activities:

- small shared-reading groups that include the teacher
- groups working together with multiple copies of the same text
- students reading in pairs, working with a partner from the class or a partner/buddy from another grade
- groups reading along with taped stories
- students using the computer in pairs, perhaps for redrafting a piece of writing

(Barrs and Pidgeon, 1993, p. 24)

Quick Facts

Boys involved in a study in Leeds, England, read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and then shared their reading experiences with boys in another school by e-mail. Researchers found that:

- the boys, despite poor reading levels and low motivation, were enthusiastic about sharing their reading experiences by e-mail;
- sharing their reading experiences electronically enabled the boys to expand the range and purposes of their reading;
- the boys' teacher was able to use this experience to develop additional strategies for teaching and assessing reading.

(Babbage, 2000)

"By going public with their responses, boys increase the connections they can make with those who are reading alongside them, where individual responses are both shared and altered by the contributions of the members and often by the nurturing support of the teacher."

(Booth, 2002, p. 53)

Literature circles are tailor-made for boys

Literature circles are small groups of students interested in reading the same book or story who meet regularly to read and discuss their chosen text. Literature circles are widely acknowledged as an effective way to help bridge the literacy gender gap.

Best Practices

Harvey Daniels identifies the following key ingredients in his version of a literature circle:

- Students choose their own reading materials.
- Small, temporary groups are formed, according to students' choice of reading material.
- Different groups read different books.
- Groups meet on a regular, predictable schedule to discuss their reading.
- Group members use written or drawn notes to guide their reading and subsequent discussion.
- Topics for discussion come from the students themselves.
- Group meetings involve open-ended, natural conversations.
- The teacher acts as a facilitator, not an instructor or group member.
- Evaluations are conducted both by the teacher and by students, who self-evaluate.
- A spirit of fun and playfulness is maintained.
- When groups are finished, they share with their classmates, and then form new groups based on new reading choices.

(Daniels, 2002, p. 18)

David Booth (2002) identifies several factors that enhance boys' literacy development. Literature circles can meet each of the needs he describes, as follows:

- **Boys need to be given choice in and ownership of their reading.**

  Literature circles give boys opportunities to select what they will read. The small group structure of a literature circle encourages group members to take ownership of what they read.

- **Book selection for boys should reflect their interests, backgrounds, and abilities.**

  The selection of texts offered to students for literature circles should reflect their interests and should include a variety of genres, both fiction and non-fiction.

- **Boys need occasions for talking to others in meaningful ways about what they have read.**

  The small-group discussion format of literature circles provides a nurturing and supportive environment for both peers and teacher, and encourages meaningful talk about the text being read.

- **Boys who are reluctant readers need to have successful reading experiences.**

  Literature circles often involve mixed-ability grouping, providing boys with the support they need to focus on the "big ideas", as well as on the words and the structure of the texts.

The importance of talk

Evidence now supports the importance of oral language as a foundation, and an ongoing support, for the development of reading and writing skills.

Dorothy S. Strickland and Timothy Shanahan (2004, p. 76) argue that the development of oral language skills is facilitated when children have many opportunities to use language in interactions with adults and with one another. Oral language skills are strengthened when children

- interact with others, both one-on-one and in groups;
- engage in frequent, extended conversations with adults;
- listen and respond to stories read and told to them.

These activities enable children to describe events, build background knowledge, and enhance their vocabulary.

Strickland and Shanahan suggest that young students should also be provided with opportunities for the following kinds of activities to support their developing oral language skills:

- creating sounds by singing and through other forms of music making
- listening and responding to music, stories, and discussions
- listening for various purposes – for enjoyment, to follow directions, to engage in dialogue with others, to identify patterns in language
- engaging in oral language activities that are linguistically, cognitively, and verbally stimulating

Oral language is the foundation for literacy development.

Find positive role models

Influencing boys' attitudes through the use of role models

All children are profoundly affected by role models. Unfortunately, the male role models boys encounter in popular culture – in movies, television, and video games – often do not appear to engage in or value reading and writing. However, there are many positive male role models in popular culture, as well as in the school, the family, and the community. With the help of such models, teachers can effect profound changes in boys' attitudes to, interest in, and achievements in reading and writing.

Enlist male mentors

In a study conducted at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick (Richmond and Miles, 2004, pp. 58–64), a male-mentor reading program was established in a local school. The goal of the program was to encourage boys' interest in reading by providing them with material that appealed to them and with male mentors who would develop informal educational relationships with them. The mentors were "ordinary" men in their 20s who joined the boys once a week over a two-year period. They became positive gender role models for the boys – active young men engaged in purposeful literary activities.

By bringing the outside world into the classroom, sharing their world views with students, and modelling enjoyment and success in learning and using literacy skills, male mentors can help boys see a purpose in reading.

> **"Male teacher-librarians need to read books – lots of books. Always have a book on hand. Carry it. Know a wide selection of books that boys will read. Always be ready to talk to guys about what's good. Listen to them to learn who they are and what they want so you can motivate them – move them – from where they are to the next level, wherever that may be for that particular reader. Share your passion for reading and never stop reading, talking and sharing."**
>
> *(Shoemaker, 2003, p. 33)*

Insight

A case study of Year 10 boys in the United Kingdom examined the effectiveness of mentoring as a strategy for improving boys' academic performance.

The Strategy

- Each boy had a series of interviews with his mentor.
- In the first interview the boy discussed:
  - his best and worst areas;
  - to what he attributed his success and failure;
  - other factors affecting his performance.
- In the second interview, each boy, with his mentor, constructed and implemented a personal strategy for improving in a particular subject area of his choice, for example, meeting a coursework deadline, completing homework on time, developing greater elaboration in essays.
- At a third interview the chosen strategy was discussed again.
- At the fourth interview each boy discussed the success or failure of the chosen strategy.
- The personal strategy continued to be used until the final interview.

Main findings

Three-quarters of the boys said that the strategy had been successful and that they had achieved an improvement in their work.

The boys in the sample perceived the one-on-one discussion, with a focus on their work rather than their behaviour, as a positive learning process.

(Cawdell, 1999)

"Modelling isn't one way of influencing people. It's the only way."

Albert Einstein

Try It Now!

- Develop a book group for adult males (fathers/guardians/mentors) and boys. Make the meetings infrequent, perhaps once a month, and outside of school hours. To address boys' need for action-oriented learning, have the group engage in literacy-related activities (e.g., role playing based on the selected text) before or after the reading sessions.
- Organize a boys' book club, pairing boys with other boys in the school or family of schools.

Guys Read

"Guys Read" is the name of an innovative website (http://www.guysread.com) developed by author Jon Scieszka (2003, p. 17) to put young male readers in touch with appropriate reading materials and a community of like-minded readers.

Scieszka asks, "So how do we start motivating our boys to read? One obvious solution is to get more men involved in teaching, more fathers actively reading with their boys, and adult men generally showing boys that reading is a male activity."

"Providing book choice and finding the books boys like to read are two areas where teachers and teacher-librarians can do something right away," says Scieszka. "This is the primary mission of an initiative I started called Guys Read. Guys Read is not a campaign against girls, or a call for authors to write books just for boys. It's a literacy campaign for boys based on my observation that something in the boys-and-reading equation isn't working. It's an idea that we might be able to help motivate boys to read by first simply letting them know what other males, other guys, have enjoyed reading."

Working with a local sports organization

In the United Kingdom, the Arsenal football club (or soccer club, as we would call it in North America) has set up an outreach literacy program for schools, using specially designed literacy materials. All of the reading and writing in the program is related to football and its star players. The program is delivered by football-loving teenagers. Among other benefits, the program draws on the uncanny ability of some children to absorb sports 'facts'. Being able to apply that knowledge in a learning situation gives them a surge of confidence.

(Klein, 2002)

Read between the lines

Bringing critical-literacy skills into the classroom

Critical literacy, the practice of exploring and discussing the underlying assumptions in texts or works in other media, is a powerful tool for helping boys and girls "read" their world – for example, helping them become more aware of how various texts portray individuals, groups, and situations. The work involved in critical literacy makes sense to boys and appeals to their enjoyment in figuring things out. In teaching critical-literacy skills, it is essential that educators be prepared to welcome intellectual challenges. For many boys, intellectual sparring is a way of showing their interest and engagement in a subject.

Critical-literacy practices include the following:

- examining underlying meaning in texts
- considering the purpose of a text and the author's motives for writing it
- understanding that texts are not neutral, but represent a particular viewpoint
- analysing the power of language and persuasion
- exploring interpretations of the text made by other readers
- adopting a point of view about the text
- exploring and clarifying personal values in relation to a text

(Tasmania, Department of Education)

"Becoming critically literate offers opportunities, for boys as well as for girls, to arrive at new insights into personal and social relations; to understand the construction of their own selves as contemporary social subjects; and to recognize the ways in which various social language practices have become naturalized and normalized within everyday talk and action."

(Alloway and Gilbert, 1997, p. 50)

Try It Now!

Ask students the following kinds of questions (which apply to most spoken, written, visual, and printed texts) to stimulate the development of their critical-literacy skills:

- What is this text about?
- Who would most likely read/view this text? Why?
- Why are we reading/viewing this text?
- What does the author of this text want us to know? Think? Believe?
- What do the words and images suggest?
- How do you feel about this text?
- How are children and adults represented in this text?
- How are males and females represented in this text?
- Has anything been left out of this text? If so, what?
- What are the features of the text? Describe its structure.
- What genre does this text belong to?
- Does anyone or any one group benefit from this text? If so, who?

Encourage students to challenge assumptions

Kathy Hall (1998, pp. 183–184) describes the work of a primary teacher who encourages her five- to eight-year-old students to consider the stories she reads to them, and those they read themselves, as crafted works in which realities are represented in certain ways. The students are encouraged to ask questions such as the following:

- What do writers say about girls, boys, and parents/guardians/caregivers in this book?
- What do adults think children like to read about?
- If you knew about families only from reading this book, what would you know about what adult caregivers do?

The teacher encourages her students to consider the versions of reality that are presented and those that are not presented in the books, to relate the presented version to their own reality, and to imagine, discuss, and create other possibilities.

Exploring masculinity

In one all-boys class run by a male teacher in a co-educational school, discussion focused on an up-front-and-personal investigation of masculinity: what meanings are associated with being a boy at school and a man in the wider community?

The teacher harnessed boys' personal interests and experiences as a starting point for literacy activities. He brought to their attention for debate and discussion the privileges and limitations associated with living life as a male, and the problematics of gender and power relations that circulated among them. As well, boys were invited to discuss how particular versions of masculinity were produced and disseminated in popular media.

(Alloway and Gilbert, 1997, p. 138)

Help students learn to spot and challenge stereotypes

Heather Blair and Kathy Sanford provide the following examples of critical-literacy activities that incorporate personal interest, enjoyment, challenge, and purpose in meaningful and active ways:

- Have students compare the nouns and verbs used in two sports articles, one about a female athlete and one about a male athlete.
- Ask students, before they read any of a variety of texts, to consider how the lives of members of the opposite sex are different from their own.
- Have students explore their assumptions about gender by presenting them with texts that are written in the first person, and ask students to assign a gender to the narrator.
- Have students discuss the relationship between representations in popular culture and students' personal experiences of being male or female.

(Blair and Sanford, 2003, p. 27)

Try It Now!

Use the analysis of sports broadcasts as a context for introducing students to critical literacy. Here are some suggestions:

- Have students watch men's and women's sports broadcasts to become familiar with the genre. Then have them work in groups to brainstorm the words they would use to describe the games, and the attributes and skills they think are required to play the games well.
- Have students observe the camera techniques used in a variety of broadcasts. Ask them which broadcast is more exciting, and why. Ask them what kinds of shots the broadcaster would use if he or she wanted to depict the sport as slow and boring.
- Encourage students to write to broadcasters expressing their opinions of the way in which sports are portrayed on television.

(Tasmania, Department of Education)

Keep it real

Making reading and writing relevant to boys

Boys will be deeply engaged in literacy when they are deeply engaged in the subject of the reading or writing task itself. Having boys explore real-world themes and issues – particularly, but not limited to, those that touch them personally – taps into their need for academic tasks to be purposeful, and meaningful to their lives.

Situate it, model it, make it social

In *Reading Is Seeing*, Wilhelm suggests that "learning should be purposeful and problem-centred, because learners need the opportunity to observe, invent, practice, and hone expert strategies in a context of real use".

- **Situate it:** Build learning around students' interests and abilities, and situations they would find authentic.
- **Model it:** Offer students various models of expertise – "the expertise of masters (teachers and other experts) and apprentices (other students)" – as benchmarks against which they can measure their progress or as alternative ways of solving the problem at hand.
- **Make it social:** Give students opportunities to work with one another, particularly where there is a social reward for improving their skills (e.g., receiving the applause of their classmates).

(Wilhelm, 2004, pp. 102–103)

"The energy that boys will expend on classroom projects in which they have ownership grows exponentially as they work on what they find useful and important, on what matters to them. Sustained engagement involves a deep exploration of ideas, capitalizing on the expertise of the students themselves, as they construct their own learning. It is often difficult to bring these embedded inquiries to a close. These boys are caught up in their own efforts to share their learning, driven by the imperative of the quest."

(Booth, 2002, p. 90)

Make the task authentic

Boys respond well to real-world themes that offer them authentic learning experiences – that is, experiences they have had or could have in their own lives. Exploring real-world themes typically involves a combination of resources and activities. For example, J. David Cooper (1997) suggests taking students on a trip to a museum before asking them to read a guide book, and then, after they have read the book, having them write to sources listed in the guide for further information. He goes on to suggest that real-world themes have the following characteristics:

- a clear focus on one or more meaningful, key concepts
- a balance of high-quality narrative and expository texts with themes that students would find authentic
- a variety of real-world resources and authentic learning experiences that involve both direct instruction and students' discovery of things on their own

Real-world ideas in action

The following are just a few examples of innovative ideas that teachers have used to bring literacy to life for students through relevant, real-world experiences:

- Engage students in literacy by exploring the heritage and history of their community, using a variety of meaningful learning experiences such as having them work with mentors, gather stories about the past from family members and from community events, and gather relevant historic artifacts and photographs.
- Turn the classroom into a library-café, offering hot chocolate and cookies along with a wide variety of reading materials, to give students the experience of using books in a casual ambiance, while they complete reading assignments.
- Have students explore the theme of water for a full school year, working with local college science students to investigate the health of local ponds and streams and to collect and analyse data, and then writing a report to the community on their findings.
- Have adult men (fathers/guardians/male mentors) and boys debate and respond to the Reginald Rose play *Twelve Angry Men* or to S.E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders*, exploring issues such as fathering, manhood, and relationships.
- Ask a group of boys to find out all they can about cars. Have them begin by collecting pictures of cars from magazines, newspapers, and calendars and using these pictures to create a collage. Then have them explore books about car engines and create a similar display on this topic. Have them also survey their classmates to determine preferences within the class for certain types of vehicle, and report on their findings.

Insight

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is a researcher who has spent his entire career studying what makes people happy. He has focused particularly on "flow", a state of joy, creativity, and total involvement with life, in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter. Michael Smith and Jeffrey Wilhelm have summarized some of the characteristics of flow described by Csikszentmihalyi as follows:

- a sense of control and competence
- a challenge that requires an appropriate level of skill
- clear goals and feedback
- a focus on the immediate experience

Smith and Wilhelm observe that, while most boys are passionate about some activities and experience "flow" while engaged in those activities, they may not often experience it in literacy-related activities.

(Smith and Wilhelm, 2002, pp. 28–30)

Use real-world themes to integrate literacy instruction throughout the curriculum

Cooper (1997) points out that real-world themes are good vehicles for making cross-curricular connections and for integrating the language arts into subjects across the curriculum. Real-world themes enable students to make connections between the need for good literacy skills and purposeful, real-world activities. By reading and writing narrative and expository texts in real-world contexts, using real-world resources, learners more readily develop an understanding of how reading and writing are used in, and how important they are to, real life. Students come to see the many different types of literature and other texts as real-world resources and as models for their own writing activities.

Get the Net

Using technology to get boys interested in literacy

New information technologies – in particular, the Internet – present us not only with new forms of text, but also with opportunities to custom-tailor literacy activities to the interests, learning styles, and motivations of boys. Information technology offers an important opportunity to fully engage boys in reading, writing, and visual literacy.

It's a question of style

Boys thrive on the visual language of television, cartoons, and video games. Similarly, boys respond well when presented with the opportunity to present their ideas and written work using charts, flow diagrams, and other visual forms. Researchers suggest that boys respond so positively to images because boys are more oriented to visual/spatial learning. As a result, visual images "accelerate" boys' learning (Daly, 2002, p. 16).

Harness boys' attraction to computers to stimulate their literacy development

Educators and parents may have been too quick to dismiss boys' preoccupation with computers as a diversion from their own book-based literacy, not recognizing the computer's capacity to empower users to gain access to, and control of, information. It is imperative that educators and parents be aware of the impact of the multimedia world, and understand the positive ways in which these new languages and cultures can be harnessed as adjuncts to book-based literacy (Millard, 1997, p. 46).

"More than half the students [who participated in the 2002 SAIP writing assessment] use a computer one hour or more per week for school work. Computer use for entertainment is much more prevalent, with more than half the students reporting three hours or more of such use per week. The most prevalent out-of-school writing activities are using e-mail and chatting on the Internet."

(Council of Ministers of Education, 2003, p. 102)

Quick Facts

Diversification in the range of technologies available, and improved access to them, is changing the nature of literacy and numeracy programs and resources in Birmingham, in the United Kingdom. Forthcoming and recent developments include the following:

- Digital cameras will be used to produce books that nursery children can then print off and share with parents.
- Interactive story CD-ROMs in libraries will be available to more families with young children.
- Word-processing facilities and Internet access will be available as part of homework support facilities in libraries.
- "Smartboards" – interactive whiteboards – will be used in a large number of nurseries and schools.
- Web-based clubs are being established at libraries for young people to review books.
- Laptops have been provided to young people who live far from schools, allowing them to undertake learning on a flexible basis, access web-based assignments, and maintain e-mail contact with a tutor.
- Handheld computers and tablet PCs have been used with target groups of students, giving them more flexibility in notetaking, including handwriting directly onto the computer.

(Core Skills Development Partnership Limited)

Try It Now!

Treasure Hunt

To develop students' knowledge on a particular subject, teachers and students can create "Treasure Hunts". The basic strategy is to find web pages that contain information (text, graphic, sound, video) essential to understanding the topic. Gather 10–15 links to the exact pages where students can find the relevant information. Pose one key question for each website, and include a culminating "Big Question" that allows students to synthesize what they have learned.

(March, n.d.)

Technology texts

In Tasmania, a teacher working with reluctant readers arranged for a skateboard expert to provide an outdoor lesson to the students. The teacher supplied a digital camera and Microsoft PowerPoint, and asked the students to document the lesson, writing their own texts. The boys' documentary presentations appealed to a wide audience.

(Connor, n.d.)

Filmed book reviews

Students in Miramonte High School film MTV-style book reviews, which are screened in the school's library and on Blackboard.com. Students prepare a minute-long script, which they enhance with artistic camera work and creative soundtracks, to produce reviews of such books as *Catcher in the Rye* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*.

(California high school ..., 2004, p. 2)

Computer Room

A teacher worked with Year 7 students in the computer room of the school, using a software program called *Text Twister*. The program included text-manipulation activities, such as completing a cloze passage or sequencing scrambled text in word, phrase, or sentence order. Students could use preloaded passages, or the teacher could enter her own choice of text in advance. Students enjoyed the change of environment and found the activities challenging and fun. Many reported what they had just achieved to their friends!

(Smith, 2001, p. 164)

Assess for success

Using appropriate assessment tools for boys

Boys succeed when they know that their reading and writing – and their progress as readers and writers – are valued. Responsive, high-quality assessment at various stages of a student's work and clear feedback, including both recognition for good work and clear guidance on how to improve, are important to all students. For boys, however, assessments based on clear criteria and specific and immediate feedback are crucial.

Design assessment tasks and criteria carefully

Philip Cohen (1995) suggests that it is critical that the criteria for an assessment be carefully designed, including the specific tasks that will be required of the student and the way in which each element will be assessed.

Cohen uses the example of a Grade 4 teacher who teaches a unit on the life cycle of a plant. The teacher has her students create a children's book that explains the subject to Grade 3 students. Before they begin, the teacher shows the students models of children's books that fit the criteria for levels designated "terrific", "okay", and "needs work". For each achievement level, specific criteria are provided that relate to content (e.g., understanding the function of seeds and flowers), as well as to quality of writing (e.g., how well the text is organized). Instead of taking a test at the end of the unit, students receive ongoing supervision, guidance, and feedback as they work on their books.

The teacher reports that, with this kind of assessment, "the students' learning has tremendously increased", along with their engagement with the material, because "they know what they are doing has a valid purpose" (Cohen, 1995, p. 6).

Best Practices

Jay McTighe argues that effective performance assessment tasks:

- are meaningful to students and model the way people use knowledge and skills in the real world;
- call upon students to apply their knowledge and skills to a new situation, avoiding assessment of rote learning and mechanical repetition of memorized facts;
- involve a product or performance that relates closely to the content being assessed, since students can get so caught up in creating the product (e.g., a poster or brochure) that they lose sight of the knowledge or skills they are meant to demonstrate;
- include a set of criteria for every component of the task (e.g., individual research, writing, group performance).

McTighe also advocates using samples of work at different levels of achievement to help students understand the desired quality of performance. He advises teachers to:

- present several samples at a given level, to show students that the criteria can be satisfied in different ways;
- ask students to analyse the differences between samples of average and excellent work to identify the characteristics that distinguish the excellent examples from the rest;
- involve students in devising the criteria for their own performance task on the basis of the samples they have examined.

(McTighe, 1996/1997, p. 9)

Try It Now!

- Send a postcard home recognizing a student's achievements. Such communication can have powerful results, strengthening your relationship with both the student and the parents – an important factor in the student's continued success in school.
- Conduct "walk-around" quizzes. Post questions or assignments around the classroom and have students move from one location to the next to complete their work.

Insight

Studies in the United Kingdom have shown that boys' writing improved in schools where boys were made to feel that their writing and their progress as writers were valued by teachers. Approaches to assessment that conveyed this message to boys included the following:

- high-quality, close, and responsive marking of written work that offered clear advice on how to improve
- marking and feedback that showed that the teacher valued elements characteristic of many boys' writing that have often been dismissed as inappropriate, such as action-oriented narrative (as opposed to descriptive narrative), humour, and brevity and succinctness. The teacher gave positive feedback about these elements while still indicating where improvement was needed.

(OFSTED, 2003, pp. 13–15)

Boys' achievement levels are likely to improve when:

- assessment criteria are shared with students;
- the results of assessments are used to determine future teaching;
- students are involved in setting new targets;
- student achievement is celebrated.

(Wilson, 2003, p. 19)

Explain assessment terms

Many boys are frustrated by non-specific terms such as "discuss", "account for", and "explain". While older students will have learned how to act on such instructions, younger boys especially may need to have the terms explained to them. They may need to be shown how to provide an argument to support a point of view and how to organize evidence into and within paragraphs. Boys also respond well to specific instructions, such as the following:

- List three reasons why . . .
- Provide arguments for . . .
- Write as many factors of the number nine as you can in one minute.

Be in their corner

The role of the teacher in boys' literacy

Research on effective literacy instruction conducted by Alvermann (2001) at the University of Georgia has shown that teachers enhance students' sense of competence and self-worth when they are able to convince students that they care about them as individuals and want them to learn. Teacher input, stimulation, and encouragement are important factors in helping boys develop into successful readers and writers.

Insight

"[Australian author] Steve Biddulph believes that boys learn *teachers* and not subjects. Girls are able to connect directly with subjects, but a boy can only connect with a subject via the teacher. . . . This has major ramifications for schools but it reinforces that the teacher is paramount to successful learning for . . . boys.

"The background to this phenomenon is based on the need for boys in their puberty years to believe that a teacher cares for them as a person, before they will *allow* the teacher to impart knowledge or skills to them."

(Pickup, 2001, p. 2)

"If we, as teachers, do not look forward to our lessons and do not get excited about learning then we can hardly expect our students to do so. If we, as teachers, are not passionate about our subject then we cannot expect to [inspire passion in] others. It has been my experience that the cynical adolescent pose is merely a thin veneer and that what lies beneath is a desire to safely give vent to those feelings of excitement and enthusiasm as they discover the world. English teachers can provide important role models of people who are unashamedly passionate about words, books, poetry, drama, and above all, their work."

(Cullen, n.d., p. 4)

Quick Facts

Research shows that boys are more successful in school when their teachers:

- have a good knowledge of the texts;
- provide texts that interest boys;
- offer a choice of writing formats when assigning a task;
- take a flexible approach to teaching, but use explicit teaching methods for literacy strategies;
- involve students in extensive collaborative work;
- continuously motivate and support students;
- understand when to "break the rules";
- provide effective oral and written feedback on progress;
- develop a classroom culture that encourages students to justify their opinions;
- accept the humorous responses and language play often evident in boys' writing.

(National Literacy Trust, UK, 2001)

"Boys will thrive at school if there is a pervasive sense that they are welcome, that they are liked, and that who they really are – and how they really enjoy learning – will be embraced by their teachers.

"Researchers . . . demonstrated that the largest major factor protecting young people from emotional distress, drug abuse and violence – other than the closeness they were able to achieve within their families – was 'perceived school connectedness'."

(Pollack, 1998, p. 250)

Quick Facts

Students' comments about the teachers to whom they respond positively suggest that keeping a group of students engaged in learning requires having the latitude to be highly creative, to build strong relationships, and to tailor the learning process to the needs of each student. In a survey of 13- to 17-year-olds from across the United States, approximately three in four said that they worked harder for some teachers than for others. When asked why, the most common reason given was that they liked some teachers more than others. However, one in eight said that they worked to the level of the teacher's expectation. Another 12 per cent said that they worked harder for teachers who care.

(Crabtree, 2004)

Best Practices

The most effective learning takes place when students are passionate about what they are learning. Use the following methods to stimulate students' interest:

- Ask students how they feel about what you just taught.
- Use humour in presentations.
- As often as possible, demonstrate the passion that brought you into teaching.
- Frequently use quotes from accomplished people.
- Regardless of what you teach, present material from time to time about overcoming adversity.
- Use examples of students' past successes to generate an "I can do this" attitude among students.
- Include in your teaching mention of people, events, experiences, and perspectives that reflect the cultures of your students.
- Devise assessments that reflect students' experiences.

(Bell, 2002/2003, p. 34)

Strategies for Success

Drive the point home

Engaging parents in boys' literacy

The relationship between parental involvement and student success is well-established. Engaging boys' parents in the school's literacy program by keeping them informed and getting them involved has the potential to greatly enhance boys' involvement and achievement in reading and writing.

A major study in the United Kingdom (OFSTED, 2003) has shown that primary schools achieving high standards had developed strong partnerships with parents in the area of reading. Successful schools inform parents of the school's approach to literacy development, enlist their help, and provide them with the support or resources they need to be involved (Barrs and Pidgeon, 1999, p. 16). Some of the approaches used in these schools are described in the "Try it now!" box below.

Try It Now!

Successful schools in the United Kingdom use the following approaches to help increase parental involvement in boys' reading:

- Home-school reading diaries are used to establish a direct dialogue between the teacher and parents about their child's reading development. Students record comments on their reading on one page of a double-page spread, and the other side is pre-designed for specific reading activities, providing space for students to:
  - list new or interesting words;
  - draw scenes or characters;
  - record examples of good writing (e.g., similes, descriptions);
  - record interesting facts;
  - design a poster to advertise the book they are reading.

(OFSTED, 2003, p. 8)

(continued)

Try It Now! (continued)

- A group of fathers and older brothers reserve time for reading with struggling 8- and 9-year-old boy readers. The school provides book bags – often using sports bags – that contain "reading kits" on particular topics. Each bag contains a non-fiction book and related activities, as well as a related magazine for the adult. About 30 book bags are made available, each on a different topic.

(Booth, 2002, p.19)

- Schools produce leaflets enlisting parents' help in supporting their sons' reading habits, outlining the importance of reading, giving a list of suggested titles for boys' gifts, providing details about library membership, and so on. This is particularly important in the early years of high school, when many boys drop reading for more peer-favoured activities.
- A notice board is set up in the school to announce and report on parent-student and other reading partner schemes.
- Significant issues related to boys' achievement in reading and writing are put on the agenda of parent/community group discussions.

(Wilson, 2003, pp. 18, 31)

Parental involvement 101

Michael Sullivan offers the following valuable tips for families who want to encourage their boys to read:

- **Take it easy:** Becoming a reader has little to do with reading difficult books and everything to do with the amount of reading a boy does. So let your boy choose books, even if they are below his reading level. If your son chooses books that are very easy, he may be feeling unsure of his abilities, and is looking for some reassurance. This, too, is perfectly normal. What you don't want to happen is for him to give up on reading altogether for any amount of time.

- **Let him choose:** As much as possible, let your son choose the books he wants to read for pleasure, and fight the impression that reading is a chore that is imposed on him. He might choose the same types of books over and over again. He might choose books that are gross, or humour that is edgy. This, too, is perfectly normal. Try to remember that he is exposed to these types of things in the media all the time, and that he can deal with such things better in the context of a book.

- **Read with him:** Reading is hard for many boys, but stories are still appealing. Share the reading, so he only has to do half the work. If the reading is too hard but the story is too good, just read it to him. Listening to things being read encourages boys to read well.

- **Model good reading:** Even when you are not reading with your son, make sure he sees you read. Men, especially, have been trained to read in isolation. Break the cycle! Read in front of boys, yours or anyone else's.

- **Show respect for mental activities:** Reading is just part of a rich life of the mind. Show the same respect for that world as you do for the physical world. Involve yourself and your son in library and school activities, chess and other challenging mental games, crossword puzzles and the like. The mind needs to be exercised, just like muscles.

(Sullivan, n.d.)

Strategies for Success

Build a school-wide focus

Building literacy beyond the classroom

Schools that provide a school-wide focus on literacy and strong leadership in improving boys' literacy achievements can profoundly affect results in the classroom. Literacy-focused schools assess underachieving groups, identify priorities, and create an action plan to address them.

Here are some suggestions for developing a school environment that appeals to boys:

- Support teacher training on the subject of the differences in brain development and learning pace in males and females.
- Encourage bonding between teacher and student.
- Enjoy boys' energy and channel it towards academic achievement and the development of good character.
- Pay special attention to the more sensitive, less competitive, and less aggressive males in the classroom.
- Advocate planning and resources to address boys' issues, such as low self-esteem and linguistic weaknesses, in the school and community.
- Read stories and myths in the classroom, and have students create their own stories to help develop boys' imaginative and verbal skills.
- Pair elementary students with mentors from the community or with capable older students for reading and writing activities.

"In the primary school it can be useful to give boys more responsibility around the school to raise self-esteem and their expectations of themselves. You could give them badges, display their photographs in the entrance hall next to those of the staff, and provide them with training in their roles. In this way, they may be made responsible for helping with the school environment, displays, the library, school shop, and so on. It is important to eradicate any stigma attached to those involved. Selecting opinion-leaders to participate will help."

(Wilson, 2003, p. 14)

Organizational approaches

Mixed-sex classrooms benefit students by exposing them to a variety of learning and presentation styles. However, in a number of jurisdictions around the world, single-sex schools and single-sex classes for both boys and girls have been examined for their potential to help close gender gaps in academic achievement. While the evidence is inconclusive, in some cases temporary single-sex groupings may be useful adjuncts to the co-educational classroom.

Best Practices

Target-setting for groups and individuals who are perceived to be underachieving, combined with mentoring and monitoring of progress towards set targets, has been a successful strategy in many schools. Successful programs have included:

- sharing assessment information with pupils and parents;
- holding assemblies with a specific focus on boys' achievement;
- providing opportunities for staff to meet and discuss the progress of targeted groups and individuals;
- assigning mentors to targeted pupils;
- establishing homework and revision clubs.

(Daly, 2002, p. 18)

Effective programs for raising the level of student achievement also address the professional growth of teachers and the role of the school as an agent of change.

School administrators and teachers need to ask the following questions:

- How well are we doing?
- How do we compare with similar schools?
- What more should we aim to achieve?
- What must we do to reach our goals?
- How will we measure our progress?

Try It Now!

Mentoring programs have special significance for boys. Mentors can have a particularly positive effect on the academic performance of boys who may not have the support they need at home. Mentors can be male or female, adults (such as a teacher, guidance counsellor, or school administrator) or older students. Mentors can provide valuable help in the following ways:

- Monitor the boy on a regular basis, meeting at least once a week, to see how things are going for him, both emotionally and academically.
- Offer to help the boy in subjects in which he may be underachieving and needs to be coached.
- Become a devoted buddy, an older friend who cares about the boy's social and academic progress, who is watching out for his needs.

(Pollack, 1998, p. 269)

Insight

"Most critically, I believe we must make absolutely sure that for every boy there is a good 'fit' between what makes him thrive as an individual and what his school actually provides for him. . . . By designing an inviting educational experience for boys, schools can help them boost not only their academic performance and self-esteem, but also their hopefulness about the opportunities ahead of them."

(Pollack, 1998, pp. 250, 251)

Quick Facts

To summarize, schools that have succeeded in improving boys' literacy achievement have implemented the following practices and policies:

- whole-school literacy policies (such as the establishment of a literacy team)
- a welcoming and supportive culture
- processes and structures to help teachers monitor, assess, and analyse student achievement in detail, target strengths and weaknesses, and set new individual targets
- a focus on developing specific skills, using clearly structured lessons
- the use of a range of texts, fiction and non-fiction
- regular discussion of students' progress with their parents
- the development of staff awareness of boys' needs, usually through in-service training

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